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ABSTRACT

Professor LaMar P. Miller, Educational and Research Director of the Institute of Afro-American Affairs at New York University, has written numerous articles on the subject of Black Studies, and is currently teaching courses on material and strategies related to using the Afro-American experience in the classroom. William A. Katz, General Editor of the "Equal Opportunity Review," interviewed him recently on the current state of the subject in schools. The interview included discussions of the following questions: What is the same and what has changed recently in teaching Black Studies? Has teacher recruitment altered recently? What are schools doing today? How many schools seem to be making an effort to convey multi-ethnicity? What are some signs of progress in schools and universities? And what remains to be done? (Author/JM)

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The State of Black Studies in U.S. Schools Today:

An Interview with Professor LaMar P. Miller

by William A. Katz

Interviewer: What is the same and what has changed recently in teaching Black Studies?

LaMar Miller: At present, in elementary and secondary schools, I think we're just managing to maintain the *status quo*. By that I mean, I don't think at this point schools are doing any more than they did four or five years ago. There was a point when I felt we had made significant progress. However, in the last few years, at least as evidenced by the degree to which schools purchase books about the contributions of blacks, etc., I don't think the situation has improved.

It is not so much that the interest has changed, since there was never really a great interest in the first place. There are other considerations. First, very little financial assistance was available to support Black Studies programs, and secondly, few teachers, black or white, had the appropriate background to teach Black Studies. These two facts taken together simply meant that there was little possibility of bringing about the needed change. This does not mean that some schools did not attempt to develop meaningful programs. In general, these were schools which had a large number of black students and where either students, the community, or both insisted upon the inclusion of Black Studies in the curriculum. But in schools where there are few black students, a Black Studies program is either very limited or does not exist at all.

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Professor LaMar P. Miller, Educational and Research Director of the Institute of Afro-American Affairs at New York University, has written numerous articles on the subject of Black Studies, and is currently teaching courses on material and strategies related to using the Afro-American experience in the classroom. William A. Katz, General Editor of the **Equal Opportunity Review**, interviewed him recently on the current state of the subject in schools.

Int: Has teacher recruitment altered recently?

LM: Until recently, the only criterion for seeking a teacher in Black Studies in most schools was that the teacher be black. The fact is that most teachers, black and white, are the product of our school systems and teacher training programs. As a result, they have had very little preparation or training for teaching Black Studies courses or Black Studies units in regular courses. Moreover, university professors, until recently, were not any better prepared than those people who were seeking training. It was rather like the blind leading the blind. At least now there are some programs specifically aimed at preparing individuals to work in Black Studies areas—New York University's Masters Program, for example.

Int: What are schools doing today; can you give some specifics?

LM: Presently, schools offer a variety of programs ranging from a series of academic courses to those that provide a combination of courses and other activities, such as assemblies and community programs. In many schools one course or more, such as "Afro-American History" or "Afro-American Literature" are offered as an alternative to American history or a literature course. In general, Black Studies courses and electives are not required. This means that the majority of students are still not exposed through the school program to the contributions of blacks.

There are many reasons for this lack of Black Studies offerings. For example, schools are reluctant to deal with some of the more contro-

versial issues such as racism and desegration or purchase controversial books and other materials. Unfortunately, one of the problems is a generally negative attitude toward Black Studies. Administrators, teachers, and those responsible for the development of courses and subjects do not see such things as black history or black literature as having value or worth. Many continue to believe that Black Studies simply means offering "soul" courses.

This negative attitude toward Black Studies mirrors the school's attitude toward black students and is a severe problem because black students continue to come to school in the hope that they can be recognized as worthy individuals. The problem is particularly severe in elementary schools because it is at this age that a black child faces a real moment of truth; that is, he discovers that he is black. It is, therefore, extremely important that the elementary school provide experiences which demonstrate to children that there are many different kinds of people in the world—that some are black and some are white, and all are important.

Int: How many schools seem to be making an effort to convey multiethnicity?

LM: Many schools, particularly those with few blacks, do not represent the fact that we live in a pluralistic multi-ethnic world. The fact is that in these schools the opportunities for white students to learn about the contributions in history of minority groups are rare. In schools where there are few black students, you either find a limited program or no program at all.

Insofar as curriculum development is concerned, schools ought to base their programs on more realistic practices—those oriented to the present and future. It may be that our "transmission of knowledge" model is outdated. In the past we assumed that there was a body of knowledge in each discipline that every student ought to possess. In today's world of advanced technology, that notion may be seriously flawed. Knowledge, of course, is important. The question is how do we determine for each individual what is most important for him to know and what will be useful in assisting him to lead a productive life.

Another problem we face has to do with materials available for Black Studies courses and programs. Only recently have books and film strips been produced that take into account the black perspective. Until now, we have had a proliferation of books and other materials that were simply inaccurate.

Int: What are some signs of progress in schools and universities? And what remains to be done?

LM: We need adequate teacher training programs that include some experience in Black Studies or Ethnic Studies, in some cases. In some school systems the teacher is required to take at least one course in Black Studies. I am distinguishing between that requirement and a human relations requirement. I think it's a different issue. Teachers who are preparing for social studies, for example, are being required to take one course in Afro-American culture in some schools. Secondly, we need improved teaching materials that more adequately represent the black experience and the contributions of blacks in the development of this country.

Today's young scholars are investigating a wide variety of areas that could result in a more adequate knowledge base which teachers and professors could utilize in their course work. In fact, there is a wealth of material that has never been seriously considered as appropriate or as having value for serious scholarship and study.

It seems to me the very least colleges and universities could do is to give teachers the tools to assist in developing their own courses or units in Black Studies areas and to generate criteria by which to judge available teaching materials. It is not enough to look at a book and decide whether or not to use it simply because some of the faces in the pictures are black. The question of content is highly important. Moreover, training programs ought to focus on the process of teaching. Black Studies, like any other subject, ought to be presented in an engaging manner.

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